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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

AN ILLUSION OF REALITY

By

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June 1987

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INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that my destination is always the same; I just keep finding different ways of getting there. "One of the most important things in Art is how things relate to one another."¹ It was Matisse who said some things about art that were similar to that; however, it seems to be of my thinking as well. Each one of my paintings evolves with its own life but is really just an extension of the one before it. The work I'm addressing in this thesis writing includes painting, drawing, and ceramic sculpture. The imagery I will be writing about involves the illusion of two dimensional space, the reality of three dimensional space, architectural form, my influences, and some brief history about Massafra (an ancient place in the southeast of Italy). The images involve representational ideas that exist for myself as I relate to the landscape and become curious about moving toward abstraction.

How things relate to one another becomes an important aspect in the series "The Path to Massafra." Included in the series are four paintings and two ceramic sculptures (see Illustration #1). The spatial relationships between the paintings and the sculptures influence each other in

various ways. The sculptures themselves become a part of the real space within the room, while the paintings are abstractions from a real space. Another way of seeing the series is to view the landscapes as negative space and the sculptures as positive space. Painting the images on canvas allows me to breathe within the space of my memory and lets my imagination create impossible space relationships as well as impossible perspective shifts. In this sense, I believe, sculpture has a closer connection to reality than painting.

The paintings in the series "The Path to Massafra" deal with the environment or, rather, in the painter's term, "the landscape." For me, the sculptures in the series are the objects, and the paintings represent space. Within the imagery of the paintings I draw relationships between the sculptures and the paintings. The sculptures and the paintings in the Massafra series work together to allude to a place in time.

Prior to the series "The Path to Massafra," I worked on many drawings. I worked primarily with chalk pastels on paper. I used the camera for photographic imagery at times as well as a pair of binoculars to help me study architectural imagery. The final imagery for the paintings from the Massafra series evolved from my memory and my feelings. One book in particular that was important in stimulating drawing material is entitled Italian Hilltowns, by Carver. To me, the book is a photographic journey through

some of the most mystical and wondrous places in the world. The photographs in the book are precise, and the architectural space relationships within the photos allowed me to better understand architectural space. There is also included in my accumulation of visual stimulants another book, entitled Stone Shelters, by E. Allen. The book includes some interesting reading material about ancient dwellings and the lifestyles of primitive existence. Also included in the book are illustrations of the floor plans at the Massafra dwellings during ancient times. These diagrams stimulated me to do a small abstract drawing entitled, "Shifted Memory." The relationships between line and shape were important factors in the development of the drawing (see Illustrations #3 and #4).

The use of oil pastels created a natural transition from drawing to painting, and the drawing entitled "The Village" (see Illustration #4) shows a close link to my painting techniques. I continue to strive for the close connection that drawing has to painting and continue to develop my drawing skills. As I wanted my drawings to look fluid and rich with surface quality, I wanted my paintings to have a new life that related not only to the paint on the canvas but also to the property of stone. For a period, I used marble dust on my canvases, mixing batches of it and slabbing it, searching for thicker surfaces. The material resembles plaster and once dry, can be sanded as well as

stained or painted on. It is also used on the bases of the sculptures from the series "The Path to Massafra."

The imagery I use in painting relates to the land, the sea, and the atmosphere, although I don't consider myself a landscape painter. As an artist, I deal with space, the properties within that space, as well as a space in time. I use the landscape as a vehicle; it helps me develop my sense of seeing three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface.

To me, the land represents and symbolizes "age." Age relates to the past, and the land becomes an element that links my interest to historical findings. In the "Massafra" paintings, the land is represented both in abstract terms as well as in more representational terms. Color becomes light, and the surface quality becomes a series of oil paint layers. For me, the land in all four paintings is always represented closest to the water (the sea). The sea represents to me "serenity."

The land and the sea share a close relationship in that together they create coastal regions. It is at the coast where water affects the land most. It is also at the coast where stone properties of the land are affected by the sea, either through erosion or, as I more romantically call the happening, "the land giving to the sea." Either way, it is at the coastal area that I feel existing elements change before me, and I sense a calming feeling that age is all around me.

The atmosphere is a surrounding influence and is a dominant emotional effect. In painting, the atmosphere encompasses the whole or part of the whole. In representational terms, the atmosphere is the air or sky, connecting the land and the sea. Changing the atmosphere of the sky will change the properties of the land and sea and create the mood of a painting. In abstract terms, the atmosphere becomes the essence of the work. The overall feeling the piece conveys relates to the techniques I use. The use of a translucent painted veil, for example, not only shifts the mood within the painting, but also can shift the space within the painting. Images that are out of focus stimulate wonder in the mind of the viewer. These translucent areas in a painting create mysterious notions for the viewer and forces the viewer to make use of his or her imagination.

ON TRAVEL AND INFLUENCES

What value does traveling to other places have to do with art? I can say that if an artist does not travel, he may not be able to feel what is needed to be a good artist. We can always see photographs of other places, but is it the same? Photography can present images of a particular place but cannot present the total experience of a place. The artist relies on himself and is influenced in many ways. Traveling to new environments and experiencing change is especially very important to me and other artists whose memory and imagination play an important role.

I must explain myself more clearly by telling a story that relates to my travels that has left my memory and my imagination with a most glorious vision and sensation. I traveled to Rome, Italy to do some design work for an Italian artist. I was given the address of his studio, and he was to meet me on a given date. I arrived in Rome, tired and a bit bewildered, only to find that his work had taken him to Holland, and I was to begin work without him. I stayed at his studio that overlooked Santa Maria Maggiore.

In the evening I would work, and in the morning I would walk. The sights around me were always different; this experiencing of change is important to the artist. The

freshness I was able to see with was much clearer than I had ever seen with before. I decided one day to leave the studio and walk, this time without direction. I walked through gardens, by marketplaces, and over hills. At one point during my walk, there was smoke in the distance. I found myself walking toward it only to find some gardeners were burning some leaves. As I approached the smoke-filled garden, I approached the top of a hill. To my surprise, I saw beyond the smoke a breath-taking vision of the colosseum.

It was totally not what I had remembered from photographs. It was much larger, much older, and much more mystical than I could have ever felt from a photograph. Photography is an ingenious invention; however, it can take away some of the feelings and sensations that exist in reality. Photography is an excellent tool for studying about perspective as well as other realistic imagery. I often depend on photography to assist my memory. However, I believe that if a painter relies too much on photography, he loses the important elements he needs to make the painting have a life of its own. For example, let's imagine that I go out with a camera one day. The day has a perfectly celestial sky, the air is cool and the smell in the air is sweet, the sun is warm, and the trees are rustling just enough to be able to hear a rhythmic beauty. I'm by no means alluding to the fact that a photographer does not sense all the beauty of that particular day; I am merely saying that the camera

itself will capture the image, leaving out some of the details of the day I've just mentioned. If I am present when the photograph is taken, it will help my memory sense that day upon seeing that photograph. If I am not present at the time the photograph is taken, I may not be able to conjure up all the extra delights of that particular day and place. Photography is a very important tool for me and is an essential tool for me in my travels.

Painting is an experience, and it offers me a complete method in the re-creation of my sensations. By the manipulation of color I can strengthen a mood, or by exaggerating perspectives I can emphasize distance. Travel broadens the painter's sensations and offers new resourceful information. Many of my drawings and paintings have been inspired by my travels to Europe.

The space I experienced, that surrounded my existence in a foreign land, was different from the space that was surrounding my daily existence. Alleyways seemed more abundant in Europe, and streets slanted upward, connecting tightly with stairways. Geometry is different in other places, and the colors blend in the landscape with new vitalities for my vision and my memory.

My memory plays with my imagination when I paint; the photography resources keep my memory in line, while my imagination wants to be freed. "Memory can take things out of contexts and show them in isolation."² Traveling to other

lands feeds my memory with new visions. When you imagine, you form a notion, and you may not always have all the exact data in your memory needed to form that notion. This enables your mind to act creatively by conjuring up new data. There is a pastel landscape I did from memory in which much of the realistic details were left out, yet the overall attitude was representational. In this case, my imagination played a lesser role during the execution of the drawing. It was as if I recalled mentally a particular image, and it went down on paper.

Drawing develops skill, the connection to the surface is intimate, and the studies become strong resources for my painting. It is possible that the artist may be influenced by the preceding generations, which may play too large of a role in their art. It is only natural that the artist will look toward his immediate predecessors because of the admiration he holds for them. However, new inspirations must happen, and it is necessary for the artist to seek those new inspirations. The option to see new things in your travels keeps you searching. Even though I am influenced by my predecessors, I try to cut myself free but never lose the contribution of the preceding generation. Richard Diebenkorn is an artist I spend time looking at. I prefer Diebenkorn's works prior to the "Ocean Park Series." I like the fact that his paintings have the life of a drawing. The space the artist deals with concerns the abstracting of

pictorial space and the flattening of deep perspective space. "Challenge the influential master," said Cezanne. There is very much to be learned from the preceding generation, but when an artist is ready, he must say, "What is that I want to do?"³ The artist must know what his resources are and be influenced by his own valued amount. Traveling to other places adds personal history to me as an artist. It is this personal history that makes artists differ from one another.

ILLUSION AND REALITY

Abstraction, to me, is the pulling apart of a reality to get to the purer aspects of that reality. Representation in art is the recalling of an image clearly before one's mind. In my paintings there is reference to realistic imagery, but the painted space is abstracted or illusionistic. The term illusion involves the misleading elements of an image that are presented to your vision. The use of abstract elements enhance the illusionistic imagery within my paintings, and the representational aspects of my work keep realism an active element. My intention for the Massafra series was to organize a series of work that introduces an experience about a point in time. My interests deal with spatial elements in painting that relate with sculptural form. I work with an imaginative reality of the landscape as I abstract space and form in painting, and work with real space in the manipulation of form through sculpture.

Two dimensional painting surfaces start out being negative. Perspective is added by the painter. I use true perspective to enhance reality in the areas of the painting that become abstract. I create illusions of perspectives in my mind. For me, true perspective stimulates impossible perspective compositions to paint. Once the true compositional

perspectives are included in the painted imagery, I work with my imagination within the space of the canvas. I feel shifts within my thoughts move from one space in time quickly to another space in time. For example, I will start a painting by drawing in a horizon line in true perspective, and on the same canvas I will move the foreground out of perspective using calligraphic brush marks that come from a feeling of a thought about the horizon. On the same canvas I may choose to paint a fence that helps the viewer relate to the land, but the fence is in a place unrealistic in true perspective (see Illustration #7).

Color application can be used as a pure method of relating a feeling. Applying an unrealistic color to a realistic image begins the transformation from reality to abstraction. Since abstraction is a process that conveys a purer state of the image to the canvas, then a particular color may enhance the feeling of that image. The colors in my palette at this time consist mostly of pastel shades that work together with blacks, Prussians, and umbers. In my painting and in my drawing, color and light relate to each other directly. By adding white to a color I can bring that color up in tone to act as highlight. I neutralize most of my colors; it helps the whites appear whiter as well as exaggerate any brighter colors in the painting. The light within a painting deals with the quality in which the artist uses his colors. It was the cubists who presented a new way

of imagining light: "According to them, to illuminate is to reveal; to color is to specify the mode of revelation. They call luminous that what strikes the mind, and the dark that which the mind has to penetrate."⁴ I use black to enhance deep space much like a hole carved out of a sculpture. Underpainting with many different colors helps give the painting surface depth, evoking an oscillating effect. The natural base color of the clay used in the ceramic sculptures introduced the idea of toning the canvas with a natural sienna underpainting. This created a closer relationship between the paintings in the "Massafra Series" and the sculptures.

Matisse wrote that "color attains its full expression when it is organized and when it corresponds to the emotional intensity of the artist."⁵ The use of color is a personal selection chosen by the artist and is a way of rendering his emotions.

Space and form in painting and in sculpture are related in subject matter, but, for me, are very different in process and attitude. In painting, the forces come primarily from within myself in that I am very close to the manipulation and the imaginary creation of my images. In sculpture, I do not feel as free to dictate both space and form. Sculpture, to me, deals with the reality of the space that surrounds the form. That space becomes a manipulating factor in the description of the form itself. My ideas about form in

sculpture stem from architectural imagery and cultural influences throughout history. I became interested in the dwelling, the house. . . . "it is the human beings first world."⁶ Form follows desire as a realization of a dream or belief. Man created the dwelling as a place for protection. The early dwellings of mankind were enclosures of stone, which were created from beliefs that "shelter" was an essential part of life.

The forms (sculptures) in the Massafra series were not intended to be imaginable dwellings; I was merely interested in the intimate contact between the reality of form and human relationship to form. As I work my sculptures from ceramic stone, my intentions are to create architectural vertical structures. By carving holes in the piece, the imagery is governed by fantasy, and the human imagination will look for reason for that intended implication. "The mystery of the hole in a sculpture is the mysterious fascination of caves in hillsides and cliffs."⁷ The artist will call upon the past, present, or future. He asks not to educate, but to stimulate contemplation. Magritte stated, "One cannot speak about mystery, one must be seized by it."⁸ Mystery is that which cannot truly be understood by human reason. Mystery and art involve paradox or apparent contradiction. This contradiction of reality is inexplicable and is a part of what art is about. Contradiction implies both truth and falsity of something. Three dimensional objects

stimulate contradictions between the reality of its space and the entertainment of the impossibility of its existence as a tangible object. Painting can be less mysterious or "real" because it is less tangible. Two dimensional work is established as a vision, and one's imagination is free to culminate it without preconception of the truth it holds. The human existence knows of dreaming (the intangible vision), and one is less likely to think that a dream can be physically touched. The process is "thought oriented" and the contradiction can be the same in both or in neither. The ambiguity that exists in art, whether it be in sculpture or painting, is inexplicable.

"Ambiguity and tension are everywhere in an architecture of complexity and contradiction. Architecture is form and substance-abstract and concrete- and its meaning derives from its interior characteristics and its particular context. An architectural element is perceived as form and structure, texture and material."⁹ The relationship between these elements oscillate; they are complex as well as contradictory; and they are the source of the ambiguity and tension characteristic to the medium of architecture. The exterior of an architectural structure can be deceiving of the interior. A square exterior can have a circular interior. This misleading arrangement promotes confusion which aides in the contemplation of the overall experience. In art as in architecture, these contradictions are what stimulate the

need for art in our existence, the need for the different, the desire for change, or the element of wonder. "The complexity and contradiction that results from the juxtaposition of what an image is and what it seems"¹⁰ is the goal in art.

MASSAFRA CLIFF DWELLINGS

There is a particular place on the southeast coast of Italy that has caught my interest, and its history has intrigued me as well as influenced my art. My concerns involve antiquity brought to the present, and I would like to share some of the history of the Massafra cliff dwellings and how they stimulate my art. I must begin by saying that history, to me, is a wondrous mystery that helps my imagination grow. In the ancient past, the land and the elements of nature were much more a part of the culture than today. The history of these cliff dwellings help me to relate closer to the land and the environment. I recognize force here as being the natural powers, human needs, and cultural demands that influence the physical shape of the built environment. The history of the cliff dwellings influenced my thoughts and sensitivities, stimulating my ideas for subject matter in my painting and in my ceramic sculpture.

The village of Massafra dates from Messapian times (750 B.C.). It is believed that Basilian monks first came to a place called Apulia, Italy and founded their cliff monasteries. Edward Allen, in his book entitled Stone Shelters, describes the Cliff Dwellings at Massafra as this:

'The Golden Age settlement in the Gravina lasted from the eighth to the eleventh centuries.' The majority of the people who lived in the cliffs were monastic or secular and the farmers of the nearby lands used the monastery as a place to go to inquire about agricultural problems. The monastery also became a place where healing herbs and medicines were dispensed. During that period in time, Greek was the spoken language and Eastern Orthodoxy became the prevailing religion. Although the dwellers were unable to defend themselves against the Normans during Byzantine times, some monks did survive as late as the seventeenth century. 'Under Roman Catholic conquerers, the Byzantine monks and their followers were subjected to considerable pressure to change their allegiance. The Gravina of the Madonna della Scala is about three miles long. The cave village, only a quarter of a mile in length, is located less than a mile from the gravina. The northwestern cliff was apparently devoted to privated dwellings, shops, and stables. The southwestern cliff was given almost entirely to monastic and public uses. At its northern end is a gigantic natural arch now called the Grotto of Cyclops. The size of this sheltered space suggests that it may have served as a forum for the community, for its market, public gatherings, and religious ceremonies. . . . Sewage was probably carried up the cliffs to be spread over the land above as fertilizer.' . . . High on the cliff above the Grotto of Cyclops is a remarkable set of chambers known as the pharmacy of Mago Greguro. In these linked rooms, all on about the same level, one can still see traces of a cistern, canals, settling basins, and drying benches, all carved in rock, used for the production of medicine from herbs. Botanical surveys of the gravina established that more than 250 varieties of medical herbs still grow wild in the vicinity of the Pharmacy.¹¹

Edward Allen continues to explain about the natural building material called tufo that is found in the area. The material is dense enough and hard enough to serve as both exterior and interior finishes. I somehow related to the material used for building during these ancient times, even to the point of slabbing plaster-like paint on a surface. The

thought that a society existed and lived in dwellings inside the land is interesting as well as inspiring to my imagination.

Contemplating these dwellings inspired the sculptures to be enclosures of stone. The "Path to Massafra" Paintings and Sculptures were not intended to refer directly to the Cliff Dwellings at Massafra; the title is intended to help recall a past. The "past" is a vessel that holds the mysterious fascinations of life, and it brings to us knowledge. We learn from the past by evaluating its cycle. For me, the mystery of the past presents questions of wonder, and the painting experience entwines itself in those thoughts.

The force of civilization is driven by human needs. The natural powers of the environment played a larger role in the culture during ancient times than they play in our present culture. Over the centuries we seek to control the effect the natural powers have on our environment. Cultural demands influence the physical shape of the built environment as we can see through architectural design which will change to support our needs. The same is true for art; cultural demands may influence some artists. Other artists take control over these demands, becoming liberated from cultural conventions. The artist makes contributions toward the new generation.

I have an interest in the natural powers of the land, the atmosphere, the environment. Historical links to the

past are blocks that build the future. "Each age brings with it its own light, its particular feeling for space, as a definite need."¹² A work of art also brings with it its own light and its particular feeling for space. I feel artists are chosen people who bring to history a vision of their existence in time.



The "Path to Massafra" series
Installation
ceramic sculpture
oil on canvas

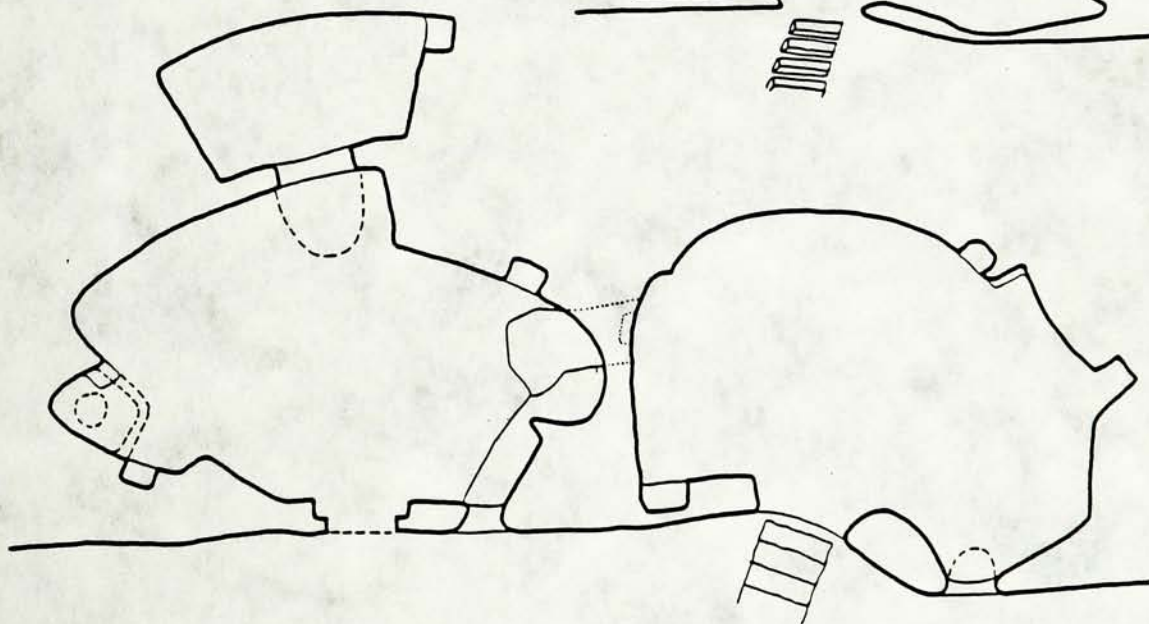
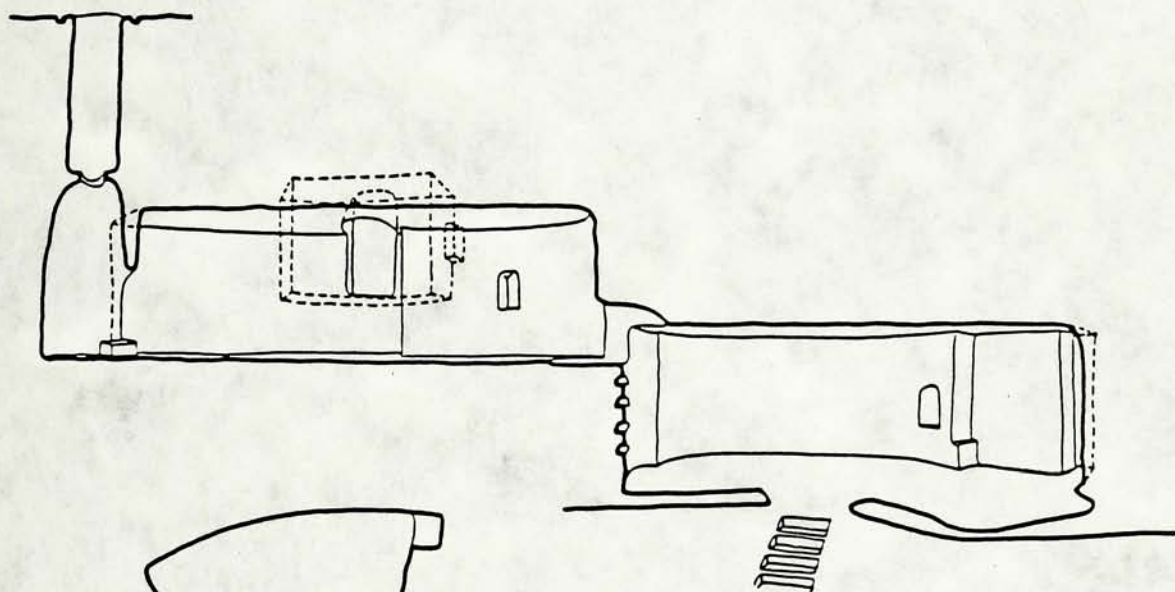
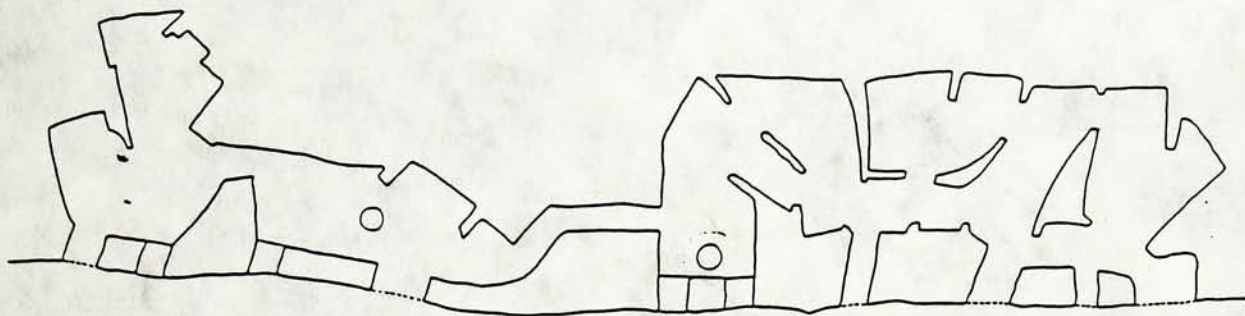


"Canvas I" 36" X 48"
 "Canvas II" 36" X 48"
 oil on canvas





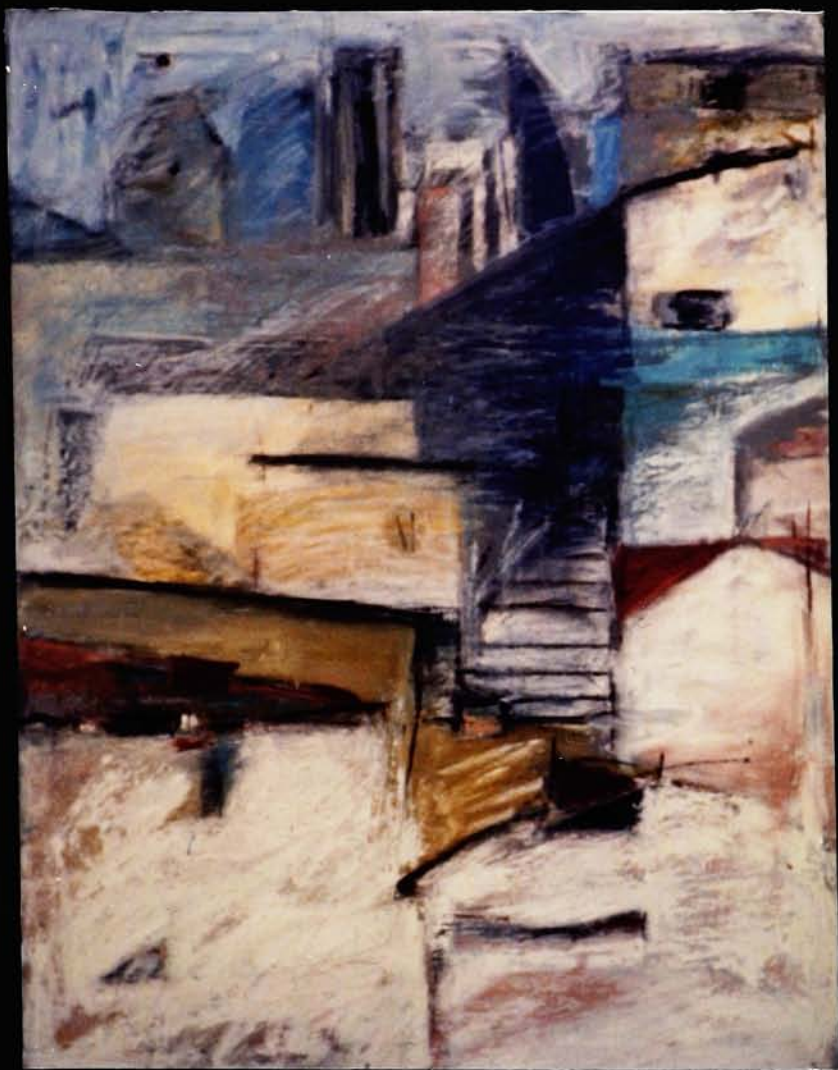
"Canvas III" 36" X 48"
 "Canvas IV" 36" X 48"
 oil on canvas



Floor plan detail
from
E. Allen Stone Shelters



"Shifted Memory"
24" X 24"
chalk pastel
100% rag paper

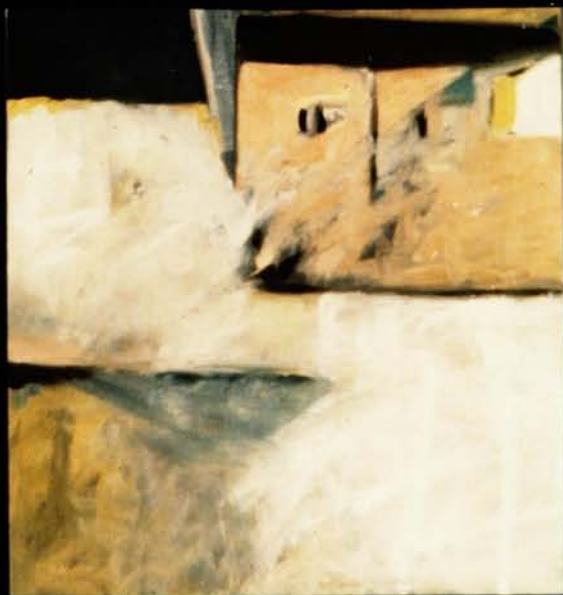


"The Village Stairs"

32" X 24"

oil and chalk pastel

100% rag paper



"Village I & II"
15" X 16"
oil on canvas



"A Moment's View"
63" X 52"
oil on canvas



"The Resort"
36" X 48"
Oil on canvas



"Enclosure"
18" X 24"
chalk pastel
100% rag paper

NOTES

¹Jack D. Flam, Matisse on Art, (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1973), p. 71.

²Rudolf Arnheim, Visual Thinking, (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd., 1969), p. 105.

³Flam, p. 102.

⁴Robert L. Herbert, Modern Artists on Art, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 1.

⁵Flam, p. 59.

⁶Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria-Jolas (New York: Orion Press, Inc., 1964), p. 7.

⁷David Sylvester, Henry Moore, (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 71.

⁸Laura Rosenstock, "DeCherico's Influence on the Surrealists," in DeCherico, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 118.

⁹Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 26.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹Edward Allen, Stone Shelters, (Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 52.

¹²Flam, p. 100.

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